

RTF C23-1

Experimental Film: History and Aesthetics

Fall 96

9-11 MW

119 Louis Hall

Chuck Kleinhans

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enrollment limit: 60; permission of instructor required. Students must attend first class. Prerequisite: undergrad majors--completion of A and B level requirements (B80-1.-2); nonmajors RTF B20; grads: permission of instructor.

An introduction to the history and aesthetics of the film avant garde from the 1920s in Europe to contemporary US work. Emphasis is on exploring the range of experimental film practice and developing critical and aesthetic concepts for discussing avant garde work. This course is a prerequisite for C23-2, Experimental Film and Video, which will be offered winter quarter which will examine personal, autobiographical and diary work in film and video, experimental expository forms, and the history of video art. It is also a prerequisite for C94 Experimental Film & Video Production (winter quarter) which will be offered by Professor Laura Kipnis in conjunction with C23-2.

The course combines screenings, lectures, discussions, readings, and off campus screenings. Films are the main texts for the course. Films will be screened in class and cannot be seen at other times. Thus attendance is important and will help determine the grade. Assigned work includes 5 reports on field work in Chicago's experimental film and video scene and adjoining art world, an in-class midterm and an in-class final. Grad students will do additional reading and writing, including a take-home final.

Required books (available at Norris Center Store)

James Peterson, **Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order: Understanding the American Avant-Garde Cinema** (Wayne State)

Sitney, P. Adams, **Visionary Film: The American Avant-garde, 1943-1978**. Oxford paperback

Tyler, Parker, **Underground Film: A Critical History** (DaCapo 1995)

Note: due to the large number of films ordered for the class, some problems with timely arrival may occur, so the schedule may shift slightly from time to time.

week one

25 Sept

Stan Brakhage, **Mothlight** (Canyon) (1963, color, silent, 4 min.)

Scott Bartlett, **Moon 1969** (1969, 16mm color/sound, 15 min.)

Paul Sharits, **T,o,u,c,h,i,n,g** (Canyon,) (1968, sound, color, 12 min.)

Harry Smith, **Early Abstractions 1, 2, 3, 4** (1939-46, 1950, c. 10 min.)

week two

30 Sept

read Peterson, 1-60, Sitney 1-19

Maya Deren, **Meshes of the Afternoon** (NU) (1943, b&w, silent, 14 min.)

Marie Menken, **Visual Variations on Noguchi** (FMC,) (c. 1945? b&w, silent, 4 min.)

Brakhage, **Window Water Baby Moving** (NU) (1959, color, silent, 12 min.)

2 Oct

read: (on electronic reserve)

Berger, John. "The Moment of Cubism," in Berger, The Moment of Cubism and Other Essays. (2 hour reserve)

Kirby, Michael. "The Aesthetics of the Avant-Garde," in Kirby, The Art of Time. 1969 (2 hour reserve)

Jean Cocteau **Blood of a Poet**

week three

7 Oct

read: Tyler 1-31

Man Ray, **Retour à la Raison** (1923, b&w, silent, 3 min.)

Fernand Leger, **Ballet Mechanique** (MoMA)

Rene Clair, **Entr'acte** (NU) (1924, b&w, silent 14 min.)

Lazlo Maholy-Nagy, **Maholy-Nagy Program** (35 min MoMA)

9 Oct

read Tyler, 32-71

Robert Florey and Slavko Vorkapitch, **Life and Death of 9413, A Hollywood Extra** (NU video) (1928, b&w, silent, 11 min.)

Hans Richter, **Ghosts Before Breakfast** (MOMA) (1928 6 min. B&w, sound --music by Paul Hindemith);

Peter Sarraon

Luis Bunuel & Salvador Dali, **Un Chien Andalou** (An Andalousian Dog) (NU) (1928, b&w silent, 16 min.)

week four

14 Oct

read: Peterson 61-70

John Flory and Theodore Huff, **Mr. Motorboat's Last Stand** , 1933, 16mm, b&w silent, c. 15 min.)

Maya Deren, **Meshes of the Afternoon** (NU) (1943/59, b&w, sound, 14 min.)

16 Oct

read: Sitney 20-46

Maya Deren, **At Land** (NU) (1944, b&w, silent, 15 min)

Maya Deren, **A Study in Choreography for the Camera** (FMC, \$28) (1945, b&w silent, 4 min)

Maya Deren, **Ritual in Transfigured Time** (FMC, \$40) (1945-6, b&w, silent, 15 min.)

week five

21 Oct

read: Sitney 47-92

Peter Sarraon on

Maya Deren, **Meditation on Violence** (FMC, \$40) (1948. b&w, sound, 12 min.)

James Broughton, **The Bed** (1968, color, sound, 19 min.)

Kleinhans on

Sidney Peterson, **The Cage**, (Canyon, \$45) (1947, b&w, sound, 25 min.)

23 Oct

midterm

Sidney Peterson, **The Lead Shoes** (Canyon, \$45) (1949, b&w, sound, 18 min.

Gunvor Nelson, **My Name is Oona** (Canyon, \$20) (1969, b&w, sound, 9.5 min)

week six

28 Oct

read: Tyler 72-131

Willard Maas, **Image in the Snow** (MoMA) (29 min b&w)

Jean Genet, **Un Chant D'Amour** (NY filmmakers Coop) (1950, 26 min.)

30 Oct

read: Sitney 305-329

Christopher MacLaine **Beat** NY Filmmakers Coop

Christopher MacLaine **The End** NY Filmmakers Coop

Ron Rice, **Senseless** (\$40 NY Filmmakers Coop)

week seven

4 Nov

read: Sitney 136-172, Tyler 131-196

Sara Kathryn Arledge, **What is a Man?** (FMC, \$20) (1958. color, sound, 10 min.)

6 Nov

read: Tyler to end, Peterson 71-125

Edward Bland, **The Cry of Jazz** (CK video, personal copy) (1959, b&w, sound, c. 20 min.)

New American Cinema: Shirley Clarke (CK video, personal copy) (tv series, 1972, 60 min.)

week eight

11 Nov

read: Sitney 93-135, 330-368

Robert Frank & Alfred Leslie, **Pull My Daisy** (MoMA)

Shirley Clarke, **Bridges Go Round** (MoMA, \$25) (1958, color, sound-2 versions, 8 min.)

Shirley Clarke, **Portrait of Jason** (excerpt) (1967, b&w, sound)

Kenneth Anger, **Scorpio Rising** (Canyon, \$60) (1964, color, sound, 29 min.)

13 Nov

read: Sitney 173-227, 274-304

Marie Menken, **Hurry Hurry** (NY Filmmakers Coop)

Gunvor Nelson and Dorothy Wylie, **Schmeerguntz** (Canyon, \$25) (1966, b&w, sound, 15 min.)

Jack Smith, **Flaming Creatures** (Canyon, \$125) (1963, b&w, sound, 45 min)

week nine

18 Nov

read: Sitney 369-397,

Peter Sarra

Hollis Frampton, **Poetic Justice (Hapax Legomena II)** (FMC) (1972, b&w, silent, 31 min.)

Ernie Gehr, **Serene Velocity** (Canyon)

20 Nov

grad students: 2-3 pp notes due on outside reading with copies for other grads

read: Sitney 228-274, 398-446

New American Cinema: Scott Bartlett, (CK pers. copy) (1972, 60 min)

Scott Bartlett, **1970** (NU video)

week ten

25 Nov

read: Peterson 126-178

Bruce Baillie, **Castro Street** (Canyon) (1966. color and b&w, sound, 10 min.)

Bruce Conner, **Ten Films by Bruce Conner** (Canyon,)

28 Nov

George Kuchar, **Hold Me While I'm Naked**

Curt McDowell, **The Weiners and Buns Musical**, (Canyon,) (1971, b&w, sound, 16 min.)

Lennie Lipton, **Doggie Diner and the Return of Doggie Diner** (Canyon) (1969, color, sound, 7 min)

Richard Kern and Lydia Lunch, **The Right Side of my Brain** (CK pers copy) (c. 1984, S8mm/ video, 30 min.)

29 Nov Thanksgiving holiday

week eleven

2 Dec

read: review Sitney and Peterson on structural/ minimal film

Ernie Gehr, **Shift** (Canyon, \$18) (1972-74, color, sound, 9 min.)

Peter Rose, **Analogies: Studies in the Movement of Time** (NU) (1977, 14 min. color/ sound)

Abigail Child **Mayhem** (Canyon)

4 Dec

Course evaluation

exam questions handed out

Paul Glabicki, **Object Conversation** (NU video) (1985, color, sound, 10 min.)

Bruce Baillie, **Roslyn Romance (Is It Really True?)** (Canyon, \$45) (1974, color, sound, 17 min.)

Abigail Child **Mercy** (Canyon)

Final Exam

Grad students and those who are writing a take home exam must turn in a 2500 word essay based on one of the exam questions before noon Dec 6. All others will take an in-class exam. In other words, no late papers, no incompletes.

M Dec 6 12-2

Because the films screened are usually not available elsewhere, such as at regular video stores, it is very important to attend class. Students with repeated absences will probably find it difficult or impossible to complete the course. If you have problems attending, talk about it ASAP with the TA and/or Prof.

Assignments. All students are required to turn in **five** reports of about 500-750 words on outside screening events. Two must be turned in before the midterm. The reports may be subjective or objective, concentrate on the overall experience or just one film/tape, etc. There will be a list of suitable screenings/events posted outside of Chuck's office. The purpose of these fieldwork assignments is to give students additional screenings and experiences in Chicago's avant garde art and media community. Undergrads turn in reports to TA; grads to Chuck. 25% of final grade for undergrads, 20% for grads.

Grad students have an additional assignment (15% of final grade), which is to do additional outside reading, equivalent to a book. Students must prepare a 2-3 page set of notes, questions, or topics related to the outside reading (for distribution to the other grads) (due 20 Nov. in class). The grad students will meet with Chuck for a two hour seminar during the ninth week for a discussion of issues in avant garde history and criticism.

There are two **Internet** sites you might be interested in:

a. The bulletin board experimental film discussion group Frameworks:

FRAMEWORKS@LISTSERV.AOL.COM . > For info on FrameWorks, contact Pip Chodorov at <PipChod@aol.com>.

b. and the World Wide Web site: Flickr: <http://www.sirius.com/~sstark>

The following books have been placed on **reserve** for the course:

Battcock, Gregory, ed. The New American Cinema: A Critical Anthology. NY: E. P. Dutton, 1967.

***Berger, John. "The Moment of Cubism," in Berger, The Moment of Cubism and Other Essays. (2 hour reserve)

Clarke, Vèvè, et. al., The Legend of Maya Deren, Volume 1, part two, Chambers, 1942-47, NY: Anthology Film Archives, 1988. [ISBN 0-911689-17-6]

Dwoskin, Stephen. Film Is: The International Free Cinema. Woodstock NY: Overlook Press, 1975.

Ehrenstein, David. Film: The Front Line, 1984. Denver: Arden Press, 1984.

Gidal, Peter. Materialist Film. London: Routledge, 1989.

Hanhardt, John G., ed. A History of the American Avant-Garde Cinema. NY: American Federation of Arts, 1976.

James, David E. Allegories Of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties. Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1989.

***Kirby, Michael. "The Aesthetics of the Avant-Garde," in Kirby, The Art of Time. 1969 (2 hour reserve)

LeGrice, Malcolm. Abstract Film and Beyond. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1977.

Macdonald, Scott. A Critical Cinema: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers. Berkeley: U of California, 1988.

Macdonald, Scott. A Critical Cinema 2: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers. Berkeley: U of California, 1992.

Macdonald, Scott. Avant-Garde Film: Motion Studies. Cambridge, Cambridge U.P. 1993.

Mekas, Jonas. Movie Journal: The Rise of a New American Cinema, 1959-1971. NY: Collier, 1972.

O'Pray, Michael, ed. Andy Warhol: Film Factory. London: British Film Institute, 1989.

Renan, Sheldon. An Introduction to the American Underground Film. NY: E. P. Dutton, 1967.

Rosenbaum, Jonathan. Film: The Front Line, 1983. Denver: Arden Press, 1983.

Rowe, Carol. The Baudelairean Cinema: A Trend within the American Avant-Garde. Ann Arbor: UMI Research, 1982.

Russett, Robert, and Cecile Starr. Experimental Animation: An Illustrated Anthology. NY: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1976.

Schneemann, Carolee. More Than Meat Joy: Complete Performance Works and Selected Writings. New Paltz, NY: Documentext, 1979.

Sitney, P. Adams, ed. Film Culture Reader. NY: Praeger, 1970.

Sitney, P. Adams, ed. The Essential Cinema: Essays on the Films in the Collection of Anthology Film Archives. Vol. 1. NY: New York U. P., 1975.

Sitney, P. Adams, ed. The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism. NY: New York U. P., 1978.

Tyler, Parker. Underground Film: A Critical History. NY: Grove, 1969.

Vogel, Amos. Film As A Subversive Art. NY: Random House, 1974.

Youngblood, Gene. Expanded Cinema. NY: Dutton, 1970.

Exams. The midterm will count 30% of the final grade and consists of short answers of readings and screenings plus writing a short essay (in class) on a film to be shown in class. (25% for Grads) The final (35% of final grade) will be in two parts: writing an essay after seeing an unannounced film (about 40 min). The second part is over the entire course--screenings, readings, lectures and discussion.

Final grade formula:

undergrads--discussion 10%, five outside screening reports 25%; midterm 30%, final 35%.
grads--discussion 10%, midterm 25%, five outside screening reports 20%; reading report 15%, final 30%.

How to get to the **outside screenings** (phone first!):

Chicago Filmmakers (312-384-5533; 1543 W. Division) Filmmakers is based in the Wicker Park Area and is located at the intersection of Division, Milwaukee, and Ashland. This is a major stop on the Northwest rapid transit line (O'Hare), so just go downtown and then back out towards O'Hare. If driving, Ashland south to Division, however I wouldn't advise parking south of Division. The side streets are dark. You'd probably do better to try to park on Milwaukee, which is quite busy N. of Division, or on Division w of Ashland. CF recommends a city meter lot one block E of Milwaukee. After the show you can head up Milwaukee to the Damen/North/Milwaukee intersection which is proliferating theatres, coffee houses, and other boho businesses.

Film Center, School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Columbus and Jackson, 443-3737. (behind the Museum) Drive: Outer Drive to Monroe, west to Columbus Drive, park on Columbus or Monroe St. garage (offers escort to car at night). El: exit at Jackson, east to Columbus (over the IC tracks). The school has a cafeteria and machines. Grant Park can be a fairly deserted area at night, if you park there, be alert. The Film Center is on the second floor)

Facets Multimedia. 1517 W. Fullerton. 281-4114. Drive: Outer Drive to Fullerton, west to Facets. Or Ridge to Ashland, Ashland to Fullerton, east one block. El/bus: exit at Fullerton. Take Fullerton bus West. This is a gentrifying neighborhood, with a few restaurants, coffee shops and bars, mostly on Fullerton, but if you go back east to

Halsted/Lincoln/Fullerton there are a lot of live music bars, restaurants, etc. Note: Facets is notorious for having the worst projection in Chicago; expect anything; you won't be too surprised (but everyone in the media community has horror stories). They do have an outstanding selection of video tapes for rental/sale--lots of European films, etc. One of the very best video rental places in the country.

X-Film has screenings in different venues. Right now they are screening at Lunar Cabaret and Full Moon Cafe, 2837 N. Lincoln (near Diversey) Sunday nights at 8.00 327-6666. Diversey stop on the Ravenswood (Brown) line. Bus or walk west to Lincoln. A bus runs N. on Lincoln from the Fullerton el stop.

some other venues may be announced; the Chicago International Film Festival, and the Chicago Lesbian and Gay Festival will all take place this fall; updated information will be posted outside Chuck's office.

For the first assignment, students may choose either the current show at the Museum of Contemporary Art (near north, off Michigan Ave.) or the galleries of 20th Century painting at the Art Institute (Michigan at Adams). Free Tuesday.

Experimental Film: Concepts for Analysis

The films we'll be looking at vary significantly from the usual dramatic narrative and documentary modes. Here are some concepts that can help you experience and analyze them.

Theme, rather than story, is often the uniting structural factor. "Theme" can be a recurring visual motif or can reside in the conceptual content of related images. *MOTHLIGHT* has a beginning, middle, and end, but no narrative. *WAVELENGTH* has a few human incidents, but that story is not very significant for the whole work.

When there is a story, it is often told with an interior or psychological logic rather than a "realistic" plot (*MESHES OF THE AFTERNOON*, *THE SEASHELL AND THE CLERGYMAN*, *ANDALUSIAN DOG*).

The link between images is usually associational rather than descriptive or discursive. (*REPORT*, *WINDOW WATER BABY MOVING*) The logic of image relationships is based on content rather than chronology--that is, the logic of dream and poetry. (*BRIDGES GO ROUND*)

Little attempt is made to preserve the illusion of real time or real space. The expressive rearrangement of actual space and time is the norm. (*ANALOGIES*) Or, real time and space can be used to break from the conventions of Hollywood or "realist" presentation. (*JEANNE DIELMAN*) Often the experimental film generates a new time-space context of its own.

Frequently, technical or abstract elements of the medium such as camera movement, zooming, focus, cutting rhythm, direction of object movement, rate of object movement,

color, shape, texture, superimposition are exploited as primary compositional elements, with the image content, or "meaning," being of secondary importance. This is the reverse of narrative film practice. (WAVELENGTH, FUJI)

The relation between sound and image tends to be based more often on analogy or contrast or contradiction than on reality. (SCORPIO RISING)

The statement made or the vision presented is most often the personal one of an individual artist working directly in the medium, rather than supervising a group of hired technicians. Often the "voice" used is the personal one we find in lyric poetry: we sense the maker is speaking directly to us rather than through a "third person" or dramatic narration (WINDOW WATER BABY MOVING, FUSES, PULL MY DAISY)

Appreciation and understanding of the experimental film requires a different method of "reading." A mind set in the viewer akin to the one adopted in reading poetry or listening to music is usually most appropriate.

Often the maker seeks to change viewer consciousness or to operate on a different level of conscious/unconscious activity than is normal. Everyone has access to a range of different states of consciousness, experimental film often seeks access to one or several of those states.

While many experimental works clearly avoid the goal of "entertainment" this does not mean that they do not give pleasure. Often the pleasure is defined in a different way, however. Sometimes unpleasure is used as a deliberate element to affect the viewer (the sound track in WAVELENGTH).

The film artist is often trying to change viewer consciousness by breaking both formal expectations and content expectations. Taboo breaking content is frequently used to shock or surprise or provoke laughter. This can lead to new thought and new (aesthetic) experience. (This is one of the main arguments in Amos Vogel's book.)

Often the social environment depicted is one deliberately set to run against the expectations of "normal" middle class manners and values. (SCORPIO RISING, FUSES, PULL MY DAISY)

Sometimes the films are deliberately puzzling: sometimes there is a solution to the puzzle, but often there is not. On first viewing, it can be a mistake to try to "put it all together" right away because the duration of puzzlement may be something being used in a creative way. Similarly, trying to find exact meanings for symbols (as in Maya Deren's work) may limit your appreciation. The power of such symbols is often that they mean several things, or mean different things at different moments in the work.

With the above in mind, it will often be useful to ask yourself questions such as:

What is the main feeling or image that the film leaves in your mind? What is the overall mood of the film? How is that achieved? What meanings does it suggest?

What are the key images or symbols recurring in the film? Do they have a common element? Is there a thread connecting the associations set up in your mind?

On the technical/ abstract level, what are the main recurrent motifs? How are they organized?

What's done with time? Is there an impression of chronological development? Is time broken up and rearranged? What effect does the use of time have on the overall image presented by the film?

What's done with space? Is space coherent in the film? Is it rearranged? What effect does the use of space have on the overall effect of the film?

What is done with the sound track (if there is one)? How are voice, sound, and music used in relation to each other and in relation to the image track?

What motivates or directs the changes from shot to shot, sequence to sequence? What patterns emerge in viewing?

Does the film have a structure? What defines this?

How does the film develop over time?

How does the film "educate" you to understand its aesthetics?